Sign Language Interpreters for Deaf Patients:

The Americans with Disabilities Act requires us to provide an effective means of communicating with patients who are deaf/hearing impaired.

If a healthcare provider can have effective communication without the use of an interpreter, then the healthcare provider legally can use another method of communicating with a patient who is deaf. However, the question of what is "effective" is hotly debated, and can be especially difficult if the patient's health situation is complicated. Additionally, there are patients in the deaf community who strongly believe that no form of communication other than an interpreter can be effective, and a denial of a request from one of these patients is likely to give rise to a legal challenge. Therefore, it is our policy that a patient who says that he/she can only communicate effectively with the assistance of a sign language interpreter be provided with one.

There are different sign languages, just as there are different spoken languages. A practice should be certain that the interpreter it is providing is proficient in the sign language used by the patient.

A practice should be VERY comfortable that the physician can defend the position of not hiring an interpreter before denying a patient’s request for those services. We can never insist (over a patient's objections) that a patient use his/her own family member to interpret because of the privacy issues involved under HIPAA.

It is best if the practice has arranged in advance for access to a qualified interpreter who can be available on relatively short notice and with whom the practice has negotiated business terms (like hourly rate, minimum number of hours for a session, etc.). If a practice can make a qualified interpreter available who can communicate effectively with the patient, then there is no obligation to hire the patient's chosen interpreter. However, we recommend that the practice offer to use the patient's interpreter IF (1) the interpreter will accept the same business terms as the one we have contracted; OR (2) there is some reason to believe that only the patient’s interpreter can be effective. If another interpreter who can communicate effectively with the patient is not available on a timely basis, and the patient's situation is one where it will not be possible to communicate effectively without an interpreter, then we may be required to hire the patient's interpreter.

A good resource for identifying qualified interpreters in your area is your local hospital. Please note that some interpreters charge a minimum fee of two hours, even if the engagement is only for a 15-minute appointment.

Each American Health Network physician, as well as each practice employee who has contact with patients, needs to be aware of our obligations under the ADA so that patients who are deaf are provided with accurate and timely information at the time of their initial contact with the practice.